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THE TEACHING OF THE "TENSES" IN GREEK¹

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In teaching the "Tenses" of the Greek verb the difficulties we encounter seem to me to be threefold. In the first place, the pupil meets with a new category, "kind of action," for which his native language offers him no parallel, and for which his experience with Latin can give him at the best but slight preparation. To acquire a feeling for such distinctions is difficult; but the student does triumph over harder things than this, and will in the end probably adapt himself to this phase of the situation. One of these harder things is the second difficulty, which is of a diametrically opposite nature. About the expression of temporal distinctions the Greek language is, as compared either with Latin or with a modern language, surprisingly indifferent. And indifference toward a category recognized by his native language is a state of mind most difficult for a naïve speaker to attain. For him such distinctions are necessary forms of thought, and he has a touchingly childlike confidence that somehow they are made in the new language—if only he may discover how. Indeed, such feelings, backed by the habit of interpreting language in the light of logic and not of psychology, have left their mark upon our Greek grammars, but that is a chapter in the history of linguistic studies that still remains to be written.

These difficulties lie in the nature of the subject and are unavoidable. So far as they are concerned the present paper has nothing to offer except a plea for more frankness in recognizing and dealing with them. But the third—and to my mind the worst—difficulty is of our own making, or rather a part of our inheritance, and I believe that we can and should free ourselves of it.

This difficulty is created by the fact that we insist upon using one term, "tense," to designate two categories—tense properly so

¹ Read at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

called and aspect—and, what increases the confusion, two categories that are by no means coextensive. The recognition of these categories goes back to Curtius, and so unfortunately does the effort to bind them together in terminology. Instead of giving to these categories separate names, he clung to the traditional rubric and endeavored to bring under it his new idea: the tenses *tempora*, *Zeitformen* have two functions, the expression of *Zeitstufe*, and *Zeitart*. The terms thus coined have passed into English terminology in translations that have added to the confusion, as may be seen from Gildersleeve, "Brief Mention," *AJP*, XXXVII, 112 f. That what Curtius had in mind could not properly be designated *Zeitart* has long been recognized in the scientific grammar of Germany, and the term has been corrected in syntactical discussions to *Aktionsart* with much profit in resulting clearness of thought.¹

Of the results of this resolution to put two quarts into a one-quart jug, it seems hardly necessary to speak. Still I may be permitted to call attention to one or two things which our present terminology does for us. We teach the student to speak of present optative, aorist optative (which he interprets past optative), perfect optative, future optative—and then tell him that the difference between these tenses is not one of time. It is the same with the participle, infinitive, and subjunctive—only here the student is inclined (not unreasonably) to want also an imperfect and future subjunctive. Then the terms perfect, pluperfect, future perfect, have for him definite ideas—that these forms express the completion of one action at a time prior to the occurrence of another action. The Greek forms thus misnamed express nothing of the sort, and indeed all expression of "relative" time is foreign to the verbal forms of the Greek language.

However, it is not my wish to dwell upon the imperfections of the traditional system. I prefer to try to show something better that may be put in its place. I shall do that in the form of a treatment of the subject such as might, I believe, be given in a beginner's Greek book. It would run somewhat as follows:

¹ Stahl, to be sure, reverted to the form *Zeitart*, but that is properly condemned as a *glücklich überwundener Begriff* in Brugmann-Thumb, *Griechische Grammatik*, p. 540, n. 1.

TENSE AND ASPECT

For speakers of English the most important category of the verb is that of tense. Except the infinitive, no form of our verb can be used without expressing the time of the action. Furthermore, we are in the habit of analyzing and expressing temporal relations with a great deal of nicety and distinctness. Such habits are, however, neither necessary forms of thought (as they appear to one who knows no language but English) nor are they universal. There are languages which do not express any of these temporal relations in the forms of their verbs. These languages have no tenses. The fact may seem surprising, but a little reflection will show that such ideas can be expressed in other ways—by the order of words, by adverbs, by prepositional phrases—as clearly as may be desired.

On the other hand, many languages have a category, not found in English, which may be called the manner or the aspect of the action. The actions of which we speak may, if we wish, be classified according to a number of points of view. For instance, we could put into one class all actions that are gradual processes of change, such as *grow*, *decay*, *wane*; or all actions that are momentary, such as *find*, *hit*, *reach*; all that have duration, such as *live*, *grieve*, *hunt*; all that consist in the execution of a series of practically identical movements, such as *walk*, *run*, *swim*, etc. But the fact that these actions are of these different sorts receives no recognition in our language, we have no forms of the verb that show to which class any action belongs. In some other languages, on the contrary, such differences are expressed in sets of forms which are in outward appearance comparable with our tense forms, and which may be called the *aspects* of the verb. The speaker of such a language cannot speak of an action without showing by the form used to what aspect it belongs; just as the speaker of English cannot speak of an action without designating its time, without putting it in some tense.

Now English and Greek—and I may add practically all the languages of Europe and the most important languages of Persia and of India—are descended from a language in which the category of aspect was richly developed, while the category of tense hardly

existed at all. In general, the history of the languages of this family shows a greater and greater development of the tenses and correspondingly a greater and greater restriction of the aspects. The final outcome may be seen in English, while Greek represents a stage quite close to the beginning of the process.

THE GREEK ASPECTS

In Greek, *aspect* is the most prominent category of the verb. It is distinguished in all forms (with certain reservations for the future to be mentioned below) in all the voices, in all the moods, in the infinitives, and in the participles.

There are three aspects to which the student must attend, and which may be described as follows:

In the *linelike aspect* are expressed actions which are regarded as developing in a way comparable with the tracing of a line by a moving point, both ends of the line being ordinarily outside of the speaker's view; the line may be either continuous or dotted. Instances of such actions may be seen in: "I hunted for my knife," "I was writing a letter," "I used to write a letter every day."

In the *pointlike aspect* the speaker's attention is either concentrated upon a single point in the action, the beginning, as "he fell sick," or upon the end, the upshot of the action, as "he gained the victory"; or the whole action, no matter how long its actual duration, is in the speaker's view reduced to a single point, and its occurrence is asserted as a simple fact, as "He reigned thirty years."

In the *resultant aspect* is expressed the existence of a condition resulting from a preceding action, as "He is dead," "I am robbed," "The door stands open."

THE GREEK TENSES

The tense system of the Greek verb is extremely simple, there being no forms to denote "relative time," no forms to show that one act is contemporary or prior to another. Such ideas are either expressed by adverbs or by prepositional phrases, or are left to be inferred from the context.

There are three tenses which are used as follows: The *present* tense might perhaps better be called an *indefinite* tense, for it

denotes not only the specific present, "I am now writing," but also the past (historical present), the future, "I go tomorrow," and is used for universal propositions true at all times, "Twice two is four." It occurs only in the *linelike* and the *resultant* aspects.¹

The *past* tense is used of past actions in all three aspects. Formally it is characterized by a prefix known as the *augment* and described in a following section.

The *future* tense, however, bears evidence of being a recent development, for in the first place futurity is expressed also by other means, especially in subordinate clauses, from many types of which the future is excluded. Secondly, the distinction of the aspects has not been carried out systematically in this tense, although the language can be seen working toward that goal. The *resultant* aspect has a separate form, but this is confined almost wholly to the passive voice. The other forms are used indiscriminately for *linelike* and *pointlike* action, except that such verbs as happen to have two forms of the future show a tendency to differentiate them in this fashion.

The tenses are confined to the indicative mood. The only exceptions are due to the development of the future. They are: (1) use of a future participle to attribute to a substantive as a quality the condition of being about to perform an action; (2) use of modal forms (optative, infinitive) for the purpose of representing the future indicative in indirect discourse.

The relation of these aspects and tenses may be presented in the accompanying table on the synopsis of the verb *λύω* (p. 109). It will be noticed that the symmetry of the system breaks with the addition of the future tense.

The space, some three pages, devoted to this introductory matter may seem large, but it, supported by the terminology, will give the bulk of the syntax of the tenses needed in the beginner's book.

¹ The reason is that we feel the present as a portion of time that has some extension, and consequently cannot be filled by a *pointlike* action. As soon as we mark off a point, however near to us, we must refer it either to the future or to the past. Notice that in English we cannot say "I am now finding my knife," while "I find my knife" would be used only as a historical present, or in vivid anticipation of the future.

What still requires treatment can on this basis be presented in a simpler fashion than is usually done. I will illustrate by indirect discourse, which I should present somewhat as follows:


When a statement is quoted in indirect discourse the following principles are to be observed:

I. The aspect of the verb is of course not affected by the change.

SYNOPSIS OF THE VERB λύω

ACTIVE VOICE

Tenses 

Forms without Tense 

Lineline Aspect

Indicative Present λύω Past ἔλυον	Subjunctive λύω	Optative λύοιμι	Imperative λύε	Infinitive λύειν	Participle λύων
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Pointlike Aspect

Indicative Past ἔλυσα	Subjunctive λύσω	Optative λύσαιμι	Imperative λύσον	Infinitive λύσαι	Participle λύσας
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Resultant Aspect

Indicative Present ἔλεγκα Past ἐλέγκη	Subjunctive* λελύκω	Optative* λελύκοιμι	Imperative λέλυκε	Infinitive λελυκέναι	Participle λελυκώς
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Future Tense.

Lineline } Aspect
Pointlike }

Indicative† λύσω	Participle λύσων
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*Periphrastic forms are generally used; cf. § —.

† With its representatives in indirect discourse, λύσοιμι, λύσειν.

II. Where there is a distinction between past and present tenses of the indicative (i.e., in the lineline and resultant aspects), this distinction must disappear when the mood is shifted to the infinitive or the optative. For the representation of the future there are separate forms—future infinitive, future optative—that are not otherwise used.

III. The mood is shifted in two ways: (a) After certain verbs of *saying* (including *φημι*) and of *thinking* the main verb of the quoted statement is put in the infinitive. (b) Other verbs of these classes (including *εἶπον*, and frequently *λέγω*) are followed by quotations introduced by *ὅτι* or *ὥς* and a finite verb. After present tenses of these verbs no change (except the necessary changes of person) can be made. After past tenses of these verbs the verb of the quotation *may* be changed to the optative, but even in this case past tenses of the indicative in the linelike and resultant aspects, when quoted, are usually allowed to remain unchanged, confusion with the present indicative being thus avoided.

Whether such a system of presentation does or does not bring into a more easily intelligible relationship the facts of the Greek language and the terms employed in the teaching of these facts, is a question that must be left to the decision of others. If the verdict be in the affirmative, there is hardly room for further argument as to the course that we should follow. One objection, however, I should like to forestall. How is the student to pass from such a beginner's book to the Greek grammar? Well, back of the beginner's book should be a grammar that will present the facts on the same basis. The purpose of our teaching is and must be to give to our students the power of reading Greek. Our present terminology has no value except as a means to that end; and, if a better means can be found, our present terminology will have no value except for students of the history of Greek grammar.